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Wednesday, July 23, 2008

'McMansion' limits could affect thousands

Debate continues over scope, impact of legislation by Bradford Pearson and Andrew Uiifusa | Staff Writers E-mail this article \ Print this article

Nearly 10,000 homes in Montgomery County could be restricted from expanding if proposed legislation on house sizes is adopted.

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The new estimate was presented this week to a County Council committee studying a proposed zoning text amendment that would restrict the square footage of houses, depending on the size of the lot on which they are built.

The amendment, championed by Council member Roger Berliner, continues to draw support and opposition. It is an attempt to address concerns that smaller homes in older neighborhoods are being torn down or remodeled into larger "McMansions."

At Monday's meeting of a council housing committee, statistics compiled by county planners showed that of 65,000 homes studied, some 2,700 would be over the proposed size limits and as many as 7,000 more could be impacted, based on a margin of error used in the estimates.

"This is no longer just a Chevy Chase and Bethesda problem," said Council member Marc Elrich (D-At large) of Takoma Park. "These things look hideous. I would've gone with a smaller lot size limit if it was up to me."

The changes Berliner (D-Dist. 1), of Potomac, proposed in April would limit the size and height of houses based on their lot size, instead of the zone in which they are built.

The ordinance also uses a formula based on square footage to set guidelines for how much of a lot can be covered by a house. The changes would reduce the height limit for most single-family residential lots of 40,000 square feet or less, and redefine how far buildings are from property lines.

The proposal would require that neighbors be told of home demolition and rebuilding projects that builders review neighborhood construction guidelines.

Council President Michael J. Knapp (D-Dist. 2) of Germantown and member Nancy M. Floreen (D-At large) of Garrett Park, who also sit on the Planning, Housing and Economic Development committee, said they want more information about the countywide impact of the legislation.

"I would be interested in seeing where these homes are," said Floreen, speaking of homes that are currently larger than the proposed regulations. "I would like to understand better if they're concentrated in one portion of the county or if they are all over."

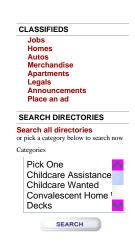
Later Monday at a meeting of the Western Montgomery County Citizens Advisory Board, Jane Fairweather, speaking on behalf of the Bethesda-Chevy Chase Chamber of Commerce, expressed concern about certain homeowners who could be unfairly affected by the so-called infill legislation.

Fairweather, a real estate agent, said more information was needed about the number of families with disabled members, homeowners over 55 who want to stay in their homes, and "sandwich generation" families with three generations living under one roof. She said these groups could run

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into problems with Berliner's proposal if they attempt to expand single-level homes.

"We're saying, let's take care of these people," she said. "These people are not represented in the legislation."

Berliner, who attended the board meeting in Bethesda, said the council was working to get more information about families with special circumstances and emphasized his focus was on mansionization.

"The issue is how does one preserve the integrity of an older community, and how little it takes to change it," he said.

In a petition sent last week to the council, nearly 25 residents of Bethesda's Glenbrook Village/East Bethesda neighborhood outlined their opposition to the legislation.

Among their complaints are what they claim to be discriminatory tactics in the creation of the Infill Task Force, as well as the proposed changes to lot coverage regulations.

"As owners of small lots pay more per square foot in property taxes than those with large lots, the rules as currently proposed would again unduly economically discriminate against those of us with small lots," according to the petition.

